

## **EXPLORING PROCESSES THAT HELP ADULT LEARNERS BECOME CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE**

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### **Abstract**

“I don’t know if I could teach in an urban area because I have never been to a school in the city and I don’t know how I would react,” stated a student in a teacher education program. Other students had similar concerns prior to visiting schools on an American Indian reservation. Two field experiences were organized for the students in the elementary education program. An urban school in Denver and schools on the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming were visited. Through the analysis of surveys completed by the students before and after the trips, it was found that the field experiences were in fact successful in heightening students’ confidence and cultural awareness.

### **Introduction**

“I don’t know if I could teach in an urban area because I have never been to a school in the city and I don’t know how I would react,” stated one student. Another added, “or even on an Indian reservation in our own state. Could I teach there and not be intimidated?” The pre-service educators in our program were very frightened about teaching in schools that were culturally different than the schools they grew up in.

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Over the years we had worked diligently within our education courses to help students become culturally responsive. We believed that in order to become teachers who impact students' lives positively, our students needed to be able to fully appreciate the link between culture and the manner in which people interact. When we approached students with the idea of field experiences in urban and American Indian schools, the students responded with the questioning of attitudes: Can we do it and how prepared are we?

We were education professors working in an off-campus program with non-traditional students, teaching them to be elementary teachers. One of the issues we reflected deeply about was how to expose the students to diverse populations so they could gain greater confidence in their abilities to teach all children well. This article describes two trips to schools, one in urban Denver, Colorado and the second on the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming. The trips were aimed at broadening the students' perspectives of cultural diversity and validating their competencies with various populations.

### **Project Rationale**

Culturally responsive educators make a conscious effort to create learning environments that are empowering to all learners. These educators develop teaching resources and instructional strategies that naturally support every learner socially, emotionally and cognitively. Culturally responsive educators fully understand the effects of their own values, beliefs, choices and bias (Gay, 2000). They are therefore able to utilize information and methodologies appropriate for an inclusive and nurturing learning environment. Indeed, culturally responsive educators understand very clearly that knowledge is a social construct and thus prepare multicultural curricula, use inclusive teaching resources as well as primary resources free from stereotypical and bias voices, involve the community in the learning process and teach learners to think critically about issues of social injustice and privilege (Obiakor, 2001).

Educators who are aware of different cultures have a variety of skills, knowledge and attitudes. In addition to being able to think critically, culturally responsive educators have the withal to engage

students using materials that are culturally relevant. They have the ability to proactively engage students with issues of social justice because they appreciate the existing strong intersection between race, class, gender, ethnicity and effective learning (Robins, et. al., 2002). Consequently, they strive to make each student a member of the classroom community. Such effort requires the educator to validate learners' real-life experiences and the many ways in which these experiences affect learning (Gollnick & Chinn, 2004).

According to Smith (1998) the current education system has failed to respond to the needs of all learners. This failure is possibly a factor of the existing erroneous assumption that an education that is effective with middle-class white students is effective with all other children. Regrettably, this is not so. Smith identified cultural differences between home and school as the dominant factor in the poor performance of many children in other ethnic and socioeconomic groups. He called for all educators to therefore become culturally responsive by using instructional strategies grounded in empirical evidence and the cultural influence on learning. Educators can acquire the necessary cultural skills, knowledge and attitudes through field experiences.

Cazden and Mehan (1989) viewed field experiences favorably and added that, when designed carefully, they have the potential to quickly transform students into learners who reflect on their own learning experiences in the context of fairness, social justice and freedom from oppression. The Social Support Network Theory and the Social Learning Theory provide essential ideas for designing successful field experiences.

The Social Support Network Theory proposes that knowledge acquisition and, therefore, human transformation occur when there are efficient and adequate social support systems and resources (Dunst, Deal, & Trivett, 1988). For example, enculturation, the process of learning about other cultures, tends to be more efficient when the learner is immersed in an environment in which the desired cultural knowledge, skills and dispositions are in practice. In this environment the learner finds the necessary support networks to help negotiate unfamiliar community experiences and cultural norms. In our case we solicited

support from school administrators, teachers and community leaders. These individuals formed our support network and shared with the visiting pre-service teachers information about cultural and/or group dynamics, values and practices. This was essential in alleviating the fear associated with encountering unfamiliar cultures. It is critical, then, for field trip planners to have these support systems in place prior to making the intended visit (Nganga, 2000).

The Social Learning Theory considers behavior, environment and cognition as key factors in learning. Bandura (1977) theorized that learning is not a mechanical reaction to stimuli but a contextual process. Educators must therefore provide the necessary context to allow learners to think, reason, reflect and make connections. In an effort to make this happen, all of our pre-service teachers engaged in program-wide, semester-long action research activities on selected diversity-related topics or issues. In addition, expert guest speakers were invited to share the necessary cultural skills. Qualified instructors led pre-service teachers in the exploration of American diversity. Teaching in an authentic manner using authentic resources and facts was stressed. Our program designed the following activities to help learners acquire the necessary cognitive and social skills.

- Reading and critiquing at least one book in a semester about children living in stressful environments. These books cover a range of diversity issues including ability, culture, class, gender, religion and nationality.
- Attending and then discussing, either orally or in writing, a multicultural seminar.
- Designing and implementing culturally sensitive lesson plans or units.
- Preparing term papers or projects that demonstrate a definite understanding of multicultural issues in the classroom and how these issues affect teachers as decision-makers.
- Becoming a member of a multicultural club that examines and discusses multicultural issues in the classroom in an open and safe environment.

- Participating in educational excursions to schools located in unfamiliar cultures.

It is essential to prepare learners prior to entering unfamiliar cultures. This preparation creates space for cognitive flexibility, thus allowing students to be receptive to new ideas, beliefs and experiences. Winkleman (1994) identified communication mannerisms, social interactions and patterns of social reasoning as necessary areas for students to learn about prior to taking field trips.

### **Urban Education Experience**

The University of Wyoming at Casper is located in Casper, Wyoming, a rural city of roughly 50,000 located about 200 miles north of Denver, Colorado. Many of the students in our Teacher Education Program did not commonly travel that far from home and had never visited a school in an urban area. A total of 11 students participated in the field experience to Gust Elementary School in Denver. Before and after their visits, the students completed surveys comprised of questions about the urban school experience that were used to assess their experiences, questions and concerns (see attachment #1).

The students, accompanied by three education professors, traveled by bus to Gust Elementary School in Denver, where they were met by the school's principal and given a presentation that provided them with information about the school, the neighborhood in which the children's families lived, cultural considerations of the families and the goals of the school. The presentation helped students contextualize their visit and eased their fears.

On the second day of the trip, each student was allowed to go into a classroom and observe what was happening. The students saw teachers working with children in Spanish and English, watched excellent teaching strategies, and interacted positively with the children during lunch and on the playground.

At the end of the day, the professors reflected with the students, helping them process what they had experienced. Following the trip, the university students completed a second survey that assessed any changes in attitude they experienced upon completion of the field experience (see attachment #1).

### **Education Experience on an American Indian Reservation**

A total of 19 non-traditional students volunteered to participate in a field experience at three different schools (Wyoming Indian Junior High School, Arapaho Middle School and Wyoming Indian Elementary School) on the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming, which is 150 miles west of Casper. To avoid overwhelming the children with the presence of so many visitors, the participants were divided into three different groups, each group visiting each school at different times during the day. In each school, the school personnel gave the pre-service teachers a tour and assigned each one a classroom teacher to shadow. Our students observed teaching and student/teacher interactions, and they looked for cultural influences on learning.

Before and after the visit, pre-service teachers completed surveys (see attachment #2) developed by education faculty to document the effectiveness of this field experience in the acculturation process. In addition, American Indian guest speakers came to our college classes and discussed the various aspects of American Indian cultures in the context of schooling and learning.

Guest speakers addressed the collaborative nature of American Indian culture that focuses on cooperation rather than competition. The issue of time was also discussed at length. Participants learned that within the American Indian culture, time is not linear, with a beginning and an end, but is closely tied to real-life events. It is real-life events that shape the ways in which time is spent. For example, family members are likely to suspend many activities, including schooling, to attend to a sickness or death in the community. It is common for a whole family to accompany a hospitalized family member until he/she recovers fully. Quite often, American Indian children will avoid direct eye contact as a sign of respect for elders and people in authority. Since educators are

viewed in the context of power and authority, it is likely that many American Indian children might struggle in learning situations that assume or demand direct eye contact. This cultural awareness was instrumental during the education students' visits. At the conclusion of the visit, the UW students were given the opportunity to ask questions and to share their experiences, thoughts and any concerns they still had. They then completed a survey about the trip (see attachment #2).

## Results of Research

As documented by the surveys, prior to visiting the schools students expressed anxiety about the experiences they would have. Many had no experience with urban or American Indian schools and were concerned about cultural differences. Of the students participating in the field experiences, only three had ever attended or observed at either a poor urban school or an American Indian school. Many students seemed to have questions focusing on comparing the curriculum structures, implementation of lessons, goals and standards of the urban and reservation schools to those of the schools they had seen in Casper. As demonstrated by the following representative questions and comments, the students had many different ideas about what to expect.

"What problems do they deal with that we wouldn't in a *regular* school? "Do the children enjoy going to school there?"

"I've just heard about the gangs and knives."

"Does culture really matter?"

"How do they feel about their culture as a whole? Are they continuing the culture of the old and keeping their traditions alive?"

"What kind of effort is being made to keep children in school?"

"Do they teach religion? Do they teach about Native Americans all the time?"

"What, if any, are the downfalls to teaching or being a student in an inner city school?"

Many students visiting the American Indian schools wondered how cultural views affected the schools and teaching techniques, as well as what limitations were placed on white teachers in the community. One student asked, "Do the cultural differences between Americans and American Indians have an impact on how students are taught?" Students visiting the urban school had concerns about violence in an inner city school and the effects of poverty on teaching in an urban school, asking questions such as, "Will we be safe there?"

Visiting students were asked if they believed the schools would be similar to schools in Casper. Of the students visiting the American Indian schools, 6 were not sure, 8 thought the schools would be similar and 2 answered that there would be some similarities and some differences. Of the students visiting Gust Elementary in Denver, 5 said they were not sure, 5 said the school would be similar to those in Casper, and 1 said it would not be similar. Students who visited the urban school talked a great deal about poverty and availability of resources as being differences they thought they would see in the Denver school.

After the field experiences, many students who visited the urban school thought it was very similar to schools in Casper. Students said that the Denver students had the advantage of having many different cultures represented in their classes, but that there were not many drastic differences in curriculum or physicality. Some students even came to believe that the Denver school was better than schools they had seen in Wyoming and no one mentioned seeing any differences in resources or safety, as they had expected. Many students who visited the American Indian schools also thought that the schools they saw were very similar to other schools in Wyoming and were surprised by the friendliness of the students at the schools.

On both the before and after surveys, students were asked if they would apply for a job at the school they were visiting. Prior to visiting the urban school only 5 of the students said they would apply for a job there. Those who said no, or that they weren't sure, stated reasons such as fear or discomfort with the living situation. After visiting Gust Elementary, 9 students (a difference of 37%) said that they would apply for a



position at an urban school because they saw it as a very positive, child-centered environment. None of the students said they had felt unsafe in the school.

Before the field experience, 9 of the students visiting the American Indian schools said they would be willing to apply for a job on an American Indian reservation because they believed it would be a valuable experience and an opportunity for challenge. After the visits to the schools, 3 more of the students said they would be willing to apply for a job there (a difference of 16%), indicating that the visit changed their attitudes about teaching on an American Indian reservation. They also cited availability of a favorable working environment and opportunities to work with children as motivating factors.

Following the visits, the students were asked to explain the effects of the field experiences on their individual professional development, and it was apparent that many of the issues they had before the visits were effectively addressed. The following representative comments demonstrate the understanding students gained during the field experiences and their changes in attitude.

“Children are children! It does not matter what race or socio-economic class.”

“Children may be the same developmentally, but their cultures make a world of difference in how they learn.”

“I saw that the most important thing is caring in a classroom.”

“Kids are the same everywhere and they all respond when treated with respect and dignity.”

“Just treat each child as a child and not an Indian.”

“I learned that different cultures have different ways of communicating. I will acknowledge those differences and accommodate those children’s customs.”

“I learned that children can learn without having their eyes glued to you.”

## Discussion

The student population at the University of Wyoming, Casper College Center is made up of mainly Caucasian families living in Wyoming. Many of the student participants in these field experiences had never traveled far from Casper and had few experiences with any diverse populations. Upon interpretation of the survey answers, several thematic issues were apparent.

After the visit to the schools on the Wind River Reservation, comments were made regarding “American” teachers in the school. Although the students were reminded that American Indians are indeed Americans, a clear dichotomy of “them and us” remained. This attitude was apparent in the students’ references to “normal” and “regular” schools when talking about schools outside of the reservation.

Another emerging theme was the interest of the students in the acculturation process of the American Indian students and the effect of that process on the education of the children. Many of the students were impressed that the American Indian culture was such a large part of the curriculum, as demonstrated by their comments about the importance of cultural diversity. The majority seemed to have gained an understanding that the cultural context in which the elementary students learned was, in fact, a large part of their educational experience.

An interesting theme emerged from the answers of the students who had visited Gust Elementary School in urban Denver. Before the visit, many questioned the safety of students and faculty and were concerned about the expected lack of resources at an urban school. After visiting the school, students’ comments indicated that they were surprised to see such a rich learning environment with caring teachers and a very involved principal.

Rather than adjust their ideas of an urban school to accommodate the new information, the majority of students said that Gust could not be an example of a “real” urban school because it had such a positive, engaging, and student-centered environment. One student commented, “The school was a good example of a true child-centered school. I don’t think you can generalize urban schools from the experience we

had in Denver.” Another said she would not consider the school as a poor urban school because it was more “well-equipped” than a poor urban school would be. The school they visited was very different from what they had expected, and rather than coming to the understanding that urban schools may not be different from schools in Wyoming, students decided that Gust was not a typical urban school.

Interestingly, the students who seemed to gain the most from the experience and to enter into it with open attitudes were those who had been in either urban or reservation schools before, or who had some American Indian background. These students were most interested in finding teaching positions in schools like the ones they visited, and seemed to be the most tolerant of the cultural differences. This may indicate that students who had been previously exposed to an environment like the one they visited in the field experience had some base knowledge of what to expect and were able to build upon that knowledge more easily than students who had no prior experience.

### **Conclusion**

Generally, students from both field experiences did indicate an appreciation of the influence of culture on learning. Becoming culturally responsive is a complex process that requires engagement of multiple skills, knowledge and attitudes. For culturally responsive educators, teaching is not business as usual. They must understand themselves, others, social relations and knowledge in new and constructive ways. The data that was collected from the students prior to and following the trips to urban Denver and the Wind River Indian Reservation shows a development of new appreciation for teaching in diverse communities.

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## **Attachment #1**

### **Surveys from Urban Education Experience**

#### *Survey taken before field experience*

1. Have you ever attended or observed at an American Indian reservation school? If so, please describe the experience.
2. Do schools on American Indian reservations provide similar school experiences to children as do other schools in Wyoming? Please explain how they are similar and how they are different.
3. Would you apply for a teaching job in an American Indian reservation school? Why or why not?

4. What questions do you have about teaching in American Indian reservation schools that you would like answered by this experience?

*Survey completed after field experience*

1. Have you ever attended or observed at a poor urban school? If so, please describe the experience.
2. Do urban schools provide similar school experiences to children as do the schools in Wyoming? Please explain how they are similar and how they are different.
3. Would you apply for a teaching job at an inner-city school? Why or why not?
4. What did you learn from your experience at the city school that will help you be more effective with children?
5. What questions do you still have about teaching in urban schools that you would like to have answered?

**Attachment #2**

**Surveys from visit to American Indian Reservation Schools**

*Survey taken before field experience*

1. Have you ever attended or observed at an American Indian reservation school? If so, please describe the experience.
2. Do schools on American Indian reservations provide similar school experiences to children as do other schools in Wyoming? Please explain how they are similar and how they are different.
3. Would you apply for a teaching job in an American Indian reservation school? Why or why not?

4. What questions do you have about teaching in American Indian reservation schools that you would like answered by this experience?

*Survey completed after field experience*

1. Have you ever attended or observed at an American Indian reservation school? If so, please describe the experience.
2. Do schools on American Indian reservations provide similar school experiences to children as do other schools in Wyoming? Please explain how they are similar and how they are different.
3. Would you apply for a teaching job in an American Indian reservation school? Why or why not?
4. What questions do you still have about teaching in an American Indian reservation school?
5. What did you learn from your experience at the American Indian reservation schools that will help you be more effective with children?